

## HARD LUCK OF BANNISTER

By WALTER A. FROST

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My acquaintance with Mr. Bannister was short. It lasted only from Chicago to Port Huron, and yet in that time he told me not only his real name, his "alias," and his occupation, but also the very hard luck experience which I shall set before you.

The cause of our becoming acquainted was accidental—the dining-car was crowded and the steward put us at the same table. As I seated myself I noticed a little man at the other side of the table, but I paid no attention to him until he looked hard at me, and in a low voice asked:

"What line do you carry?"

"I beg your pardon?" I asked.

"What line do you carry?"

There was no escape. "Law books," I answered. "I am a lawyer."

He smiled and held out a fat hand. "We are in about the same profession. I am a detective."

"Yes," I replied, for I felt a desire to know more of a man who could see any resemblance between a lawyer and a detective. "We are, it might be said, slightly related."

"Well, when you have practiced longer you will understand what I mean when I say that we are in about the same line."

He smiled, and between orders to the waiter told me his story.

"Yes, when you have practiced longer you will understand what I mean. You lawyers have to use us at every step you take; you can't get on without us. A witness goes back on you and gets lost, and the first thing you do is to call one of us in to look up your man for you. Lawyers, doctors, business men and bankers, you all give us a lot of work."

"Speaking of bankers, I'm down on all of 'em, for it was while doing some work for a banker that I had the hardest piece of luck I ever struck, and just when everything was going lovely, too."

"It was this way! The chief called me in one afternoon, and said he: 'Jim, I want you to go down to Elberton and see Stevens, the banker. There's been some work done down there, and he's afraid some of it may come his way.'

"He'll give you the facts, and then go to work. The gang that's suspected is something like the Fiske outfit you gathered in at Oshkosh last fall."

"The next morning I was in Stevens' private office, and it was a dandy. But never mind that."

"The next morning, after seeing old Stevens, I dropped into a saloon where I'd seen some young fellows go, and found six or eight boys having a quiet game. I had a beer, bought a cigar, and went out."

"Next morning I dropped in again. The bar-keep recognized me and said, 'Good morning.' 'Good morning,' says I, and got my drink and cigar and went out without saying anything more. I kept on dropping in and some of the chaps began to notice me, but they held off, which made me think I might be somewhere on the right track, so I went in steady."

"After I'd been in town for about a week one of the young fellows asked me at the saloon one evening what I was selling."

"I'm buying," said I.

"Buying what?"

"Land." And then he introduced me to the rest of the bunch who were at the table playing. They asked me to come in, and I did. They couldn't play much, I saw, but I let them win a couple of dollars, and then I cleared out."

"A few days after that when I went in—it was one afternoon, about half-past four—I found some of the gang there. Then I knew they wasn't working, for if they had been they couldn't have been there then."

"Well, I was pretty sure they was the boys I was looking for, and so, wanting to see what they'd rise to, I managed to drop a set of skeleton keys on the floor when I was just going to pay for the drinks. I bent down quick and picked 'em up and shoved 'em into my pocket, but I saw they was 'on,' for in a few minutes one of the bunch came over to me and says:

"See here, Mr. Jenks' (I'd told 'em my name was Jenks), you might as well tell us a little more about yourself. We know you're not down here to look up land, and it's our opinion you may be after something that begins with D."

"Dough was what he meant. But I was not going to be drawn out, at least, not yet, and so I said:

"It strikes me I don't know much about you boys yet. Don't you think you'd better show up first?"

"They held off a bit even then, but finally one of them, a tall, shaggy chap he was, came close to me and says:

"Were you ever in Janesville?" I laughed and said: "Why, yes, I guess so."

"Were you there two weeks ago?" I looked around for a moment, as if to see there wasn't any one could hear, and then I said:

"Yes, but I didn't do that job." "He wasn't quite sure yet, for he tried me again:

"Who bought it of the man who 'found' it?" "He was thinking of the big diamond robbery that had just come off in Janesville. It was a neat piece of

work, and the chief had two of his best men on it."

"How can I tell?" I asked. "They say the Jew got it, but he cleared before the 'Blues' got there."

"I thought they was going to talk up, but the tall man was suspicious, I saw, and so I went out, after setting them up again."

"That evening the tall man asked me to take a little ride with him. I wanted 'em to feel sure of me, and so I put a 'Jimmy' under my coat, and when we got into the cutter I wrapped it up in the blanket and put it under the seat."

"We had a nice drive, for it was a dandy night, but the chap didn't say a thing about himself or the gang or me. He only talked about the fishing up North, and we didn't get anywhere. Along about eleven we came to Rite's place, and he said we'd go in and have a drink. I jumped out and went to tie the horse, asking him to throw the blanket over her. He proceeded to do so, and of course the Jimmy fell out."

"He laughed and clapped me on the back."

"I guess we've got you located now, old man," says he. "And now we'll go back."

"We went to the rooms where the rest of the gang were waiting for us."

"I guess he'll do, boys," said he, and then he says to me: "I have an idea that we can put a man like you in the way of making something pretty."

"They grinned, and then we talked things over."

"I had been traveling with them pretty steady for a month, when one night they told me they were going to do a little piece of work on a bank in town (Stevens' bank, of course), and they wanted me to 'fix' the safe."

"All right, boys," says I. "I'll have to send down to Chi for my 'kit,' though."

"Next morning I went over to Stevens' and put him 'on,' telling him to put some marked bills in the safe for that night. I got the combination from him, too, thinking I might have some trouble with the safe, and I had to get it open one way or another."

"Then I went over to the chief of police and fixed it up with him so that he'd surround the bank after we had gone in and nab us as we came out."

"The bank proposition was a little heavy for the boys, some of 'em being a little new at such work, and when Tuesday night came they began to get a little nervous. But I filled 'em up with drinks, and told 'em how easy it was, gave out a long talk on my own experiences, and by Wednesday afternoon they were ready for anything."

"We had a good supper, with lots of drinks of all sorts, and some of the boys were pretty well jugged by the time we were through."

"We had set the job for midnight, met then at a barber shop, where the big chap had a job (he was slick), and then separated, meeting again at the bank as the clock struck twelve."

"The big fellow broke in the door with his shoulder—he was as strong as a bull-moose—and we all piled in after him. I remember I was the last man in, and I was thinking how fine they were going to look in the papers next morning, the five of them standing in a row, with me at their right as the man who had 'gathered them in.' I laughed to myself as I opened the safe, and then I heard the snap of a man's fingers, a voice cried 'now, men!' the lights were turned on, and each of us was looking into the barrel of a gun."

"I looked at the man who was covering me, and you can just about figure out how I felt when I saw that it was that young kid with the yellow hair. He smiled a bit, and then told us to throw up our hands."

"All of us did except the big chap, and he got a bullet through his hip. I tried to remonstrate with the kid, who seemed to be running the thing, but he told me to 'cut it out,' and I saw that it was no use."

"They took us down to the jail and got our faces by flashlight. I was standing with the rest of the bunch, and my name (my real one, too, for I'd given it to old Stevens in the first place) was stuck underneath."

"I tried to drive it into the chief of police that I was out after the men, but he said I'd given wrong information, and the light-haired kid was boss there, anyhow."

"Then they threw us into cells that a dog couldn't have slept in, and sent us down to Chicago next morning handcuffed together, like Siamese twins. They tried us, and I got off with a reprimand from the court for 'encouraging crime and, though a detective by profession, leading young and weak boys astray.'

"Then the chief lawed me for an hour, and gave me a 'vacation' for incompetency and general stupidity. And the papers made it hot for the chief for 'luring such men, and then, of course, he chuckled me permanent."

"All because that kid with the yellow hair had started in, on his own hook, to run the same gang that the chief had set me on! If he'd waited three minutes I'd have landed the bunch. I'd have 'gathered' in the outlaws, as the papers said. But you see how it was."

"And what made it all the worse, the tall chap turned out to be Jim Cummings, wanted in St. Louis and Boston for forgery and robbing the mails."

"As it was—well, it was hard luck, wasn't it?" Mr. Bannister stared gleefully out into the night.

"Come," said he, after a moment, "let's get something to smoke. Every time I think of that kid with the yellow hair it makes my head ache. Let's smoke up." And I followed his short, squat figure into the smoking compartment.

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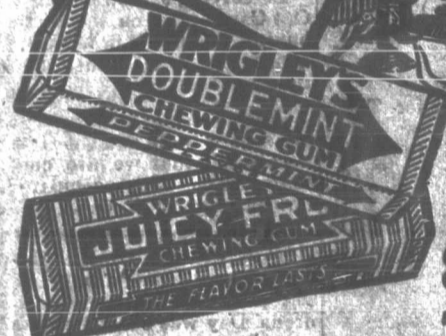
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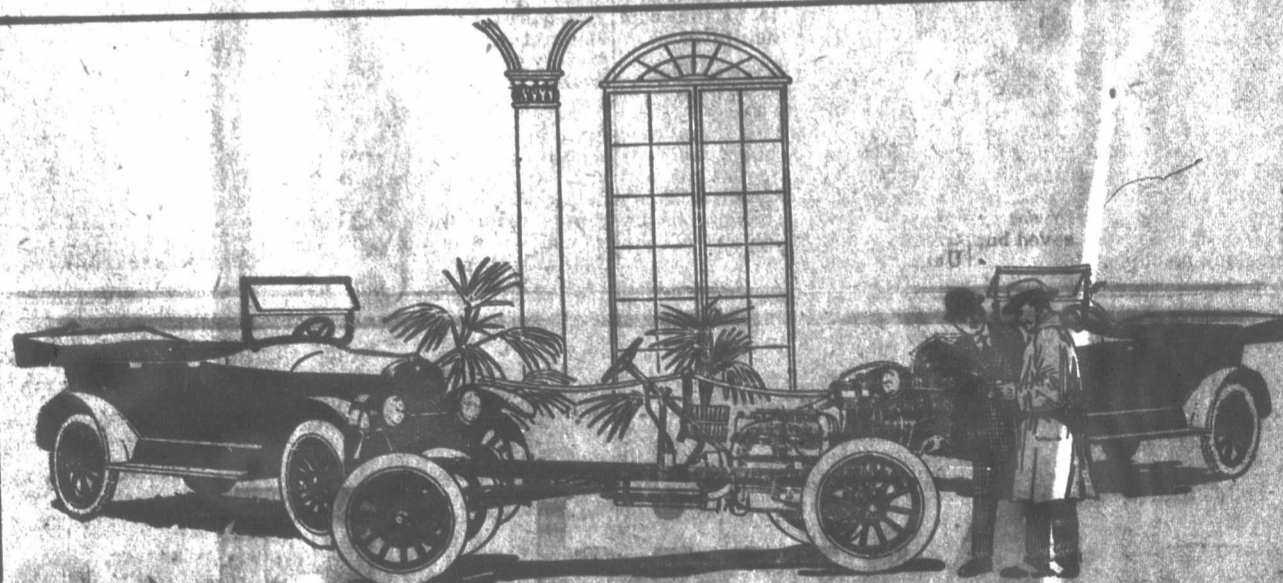
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